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From λόγος to μῦθος: Babrius' Fabulous Poetics

Abstract: In his prologues, Babrius lays out his conceptualization of the fabulistic genre by juxtaposing μῦθος and λόγος, two terms used to designate "fable" in antiquity. Babrius reaches this goal by interacting with Plato's *Phaedo* (61b) and *Politicus* (272c–d). In Babrius' description of the golden age, animals knew λόγοι similar to what Babrius is telling Branchus in the form of μῦθοι (1 *prol.* 5–7). The change in terminology highlights that when the λόγοι shared between the inhabitants of the golden age are extracted from their original setting, they are told in the form of μῦθοι. Babrius can only recreate these vocal interactions between animals by turning λόγοι into μῦθοι, fictionalizing the ability of animals to talk which was once a reality. The allusions to Plato highlight the value of his fables and their potential to convey serious messages through a process of fictionalization which requires a transformation of λόγος, "discourse about truth", into μῦθος, "fiction".

1 Introduction

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Babrius is "a Greek writer of fables".[1] This statement might seem unproblematic.[2] However, the definition gets more complicated if one tries to pinpoint the meaning behind the generic term "fable", more specifically, what was a fable for Babrius? This question is foundational for the study of Babrius' *Mythiambi*, whose poetics one cannot understand without exploring the author's conceptualization of iambic poetry and

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1 Knowles 2005, s.v. *Babrius.*
2 This being said, one may prefer to define Babrius as a writer of Greek fables, as we are not sure about the origin of the author. See Spielhofer 2023, 12–18.

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fable.[3] While recent studies have explored Babrius' iambic poetry,[4] here I intend to uncover how Babrius understands fables as a genre by analysing Babrius' use of μῦθος and λόγος, two terms used to indicate fables in ancient Greek.[5] Because our author presents his readers with programmatic statements about the nature of his compositions in the prologues to the two books of the *Mythiambi*, my discussion will focus on these two texts.[6]

My contention is that Babrius shapes his definition of the fable genre by interacting with philosophy. This cross-generic relationship is not new: not only did ancient philosophy often utilize fables or fable-like narratives to effectively convey its principles, but fables were also recognized for their ethical insights and educational value.[7] While the *Mythiambi* is not to be deemed a philosophical work per se, Babrius deepens the generic interplay between philosophy and fables by linking his work with philosophical literature, specifically Plato's dialogues. Following in the footsteps of Hawkins, who discussed possible thematic connections between Plato, Callimachus and Babrius, I will further explore this relationship by identifying specific allusions to Plato in Babrius' first prologue. I submit that Babrius interacts with Platonic dialogues, especially the *Politicus* and the *Phaedo*, so as to illustrate the pedagogical value of his μῦθοι while highlighting their potential as fictional and amusing narratives.[8] In this way, the content of Babrius' μῦθοι and their literary form and style are fundamentally intertwined.[9]

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3 See Spielhofer 2023, 58. Cf. Hose 2000, 16–17.

4 See Hawkins 2014; 2015; Mann 2018; Spielhofer 2023.

5 See van Dijk 1997, 79–90.

6 For an in-depth discussion of the two prologues, see Spielhofer 2023, 87–123.

7 For example, Aesopic fables are found, e.g. in Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle (see e.g. Holzberg 2002, 12–13). According to Adrados 1999, 604–644, fables also played an important role in the development of Cynic and Stoic thought. On Aesop as a sage and the philosophical relevance of Aesopic fables, see Kurke 2011. Notably, Pliny the Elder (*HN* 36.82) defines Aesop as a *fabellarum philosophus*.

8 The term fiction might be anachronistic in the context of Greek literature. I use it to refer to what Hose 2015, 373, labels the "as if" mode, which modern literature calls "fictionality" and which points to that "agreement between a literary text and its reader that what is depicted in the text is presented in such a way that it (merely) gives the impression of having happened." On the relationship between literature and truth in Greek thought, see Hose 2015 with further bibliography.

9 Hawkins 2015, 315, argues that a thematic relationship between Plato and Babrius should not flag a philosophical dimension in Babrius' fables, as our author is more concerned with matters of form and style. Although Babrius is not a philosopher, he emphasizes the philosophical potential of his fables and engages with philosophical texts.

2 Babrius' second prologue

In both prologues, Babrius defines his own compositions as μῦθοι, not as λόγοι: μυθίαμβον (2 *prol.* 8), μυθιάζομαι (2 *prol.* 13), μυθέομεν (1 *prol.* 7), μύθους (1 *prol.* 16).[10] Let us start with the second prologue, as Babrius gives here a brief history of the genre of the fable. The author contrasts his μῦθοι with Aesopic λόγοι, the first signifying fables in verse, the second fables in prose:

> Μῦθος μέν, ὦ παῖ βασιλέως Ἀλεξάνδρου,
> Σύρων παλαιῶν ἐστιν εὕρεμ᾽ ἀνθρώπων,
> οἳ πρίν ποτ᾽ ἦσαν ἐπὶ Νίνου τε καὶ Βήλου.
> πρῶτος δέ, φασίν, εἶπε παισὶν Ἑλλήνων
> Αἴσωπος ὁ σοφός, εἶπε καὶ Λιβυστίνοις   5
> λόγους Κυβίσσης. ἀλλ᾽ ἐγὼ νέῃ μούσῃ
> δίδωμι καθαρῷ χρυσίῳ χαλινώσας
> τὸν μυθίαμβον ὥσπερ ἵππον ὁπλίτην.
> ὑπ᾽ ἐμοῦ δὲ πρώτου τῆς θύρης ἀνοιχθείσης
> εἰσῆλθον ἄλλοι, καὶ σοφωτέρης μούσης   10
> γρίφοις ὁμοίας ἐκφέρουσι ποιήσεις,
> μαθόντες οὐδὲν πλεῖον ἤ με γινώσκειν.
> ἐγὼ δὲ λευκῇ μυθιάζομαι ῥήσει,
> καὶ τῶν ἰάμβων τοὺς ὀδόντας οὐ θήγω,
> ἀλλ᾽ εὖ πυρώσας, εὖ δὲ κέντρα πρηΰνας,   15
> ἐκ δευτέρου σοι τήνδε βίβλον ἀείδω.
>   (Babr. 2 *prol.*)

Fable (μῦθος), son of King Alexander, is the invention of Syrian men of old, who lived once upon a time in the days of Ninus and Belus. Aesop the wise — they say — was the first to tell fables to the sons of the Hellenes, and Cybisses also told fables (λόγους) to the Libyans. But I offer them with a new muse, having bridled my *mythiambos* with pure gold, like a warhorse. I was the first to open the door. Once I did it, others entered and, only having come to know who I am but having learnt nothing else, they publish poems similar to riddles of a more learned muse. But I tell iambic fables in a clear style. Also, I do not sharpen the teeth of

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10 In the surviving texts attributed to Babrius, λόγος appears eight times outside of the prologues with the more common meaning of "word" or "speech" (15.12; 44.4; 50.11; 53.3; 95.9; 95.13; 95.37; 136.17). It also appears in three epimythia (12.26; 40.5; 56.8), where it could have the meaning of "fable". However, according to Vaio 2001 and Holzberg 2019, these epimythia are later interpolations. μῦθος appears six times outside of the prologues with the meaning of "word" or "speech" (15.3; 77.3; 103.15; 107.3; 142.2; 143.5). It is also used with the meaning of "fable" in 11 epimythia (18.5; 22.13*; 31.23; 34.14*; 36.13; 38.8*; 59.16*; 96.5*; 107.16*; 116.15*; 119.11), four of which — i.e. those not marked by an asterisk — might be original according to Vaio 2001. There is no original epimythium where Babrius labels his compositions as λόγοι.

the iambs; but, having tested them well by fire and properly softened their sting, I sing this book for you for the second time.

(Transl. V.B.)

Aesop and Cybisses are said to have composed λόγοι,[11] while in line 8 Babrius' work is qualified as μυθίαμβος, a *hapax legomenon*, which results from the fusion of μῦθος and ἴαμβος. Line 6 has a break in the middle, with ἀλλά creating a strong divide between the λόγοι of Aesop and Cybisses on the one hand, and Babrius' new muse on the other. As others have observed, Babrius here differentiates between his compositions in verse, μῦθος, and Aesopic fables in prose, λόγοι.[12] This interpretation is corroborated by the fact that Babrius highlights the poetic nature of his work by means of the verb ἀείδω (2 *prol.* 16), whereas Aesop's act of narrating fables is described with the verbs εἶπε (2 *prol.* 4) and φράζω (1 *prol.* 16). The choice of these verbs is not random but reflects the fact that Babrius composes verse in contrast to Aesop's prose narratives.

But what about μῦθος at the very beginning of the second prologue referring to the fabulistic activity of (As)syrians?[13] μῦθος here is probably used to represent the whole genre of the fable in the context of its Syrian origin.[14] Babrius' claim that the fable originates from Syria aligns with modern scholarly theories concerning the Near Eastern origin of the genre.[15] Furthermore, it is my contention that the term μῦθος could also refer, more specifically, to the use of verse fables in Mesopotamia.[16] There are ancient Mesopotamian texts, so-called "disputation poems", which feature arguments presented by two speakers trying to establish their preeminence over each other.[17] In these poems, animals, plants, and other usually inarticulate beings compete by means of elaborate arguments.[18] First at-

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11 In lines 4–6, I take λόγους as the object of the verb εἶπε in both instances.

12 See Luzzatto 1975, 67, and van Dijk 1997, 90. Theon, a Greek rhetorician (1st/2nd CE), reports that prose writers usually designate λόγοι as "fables", not as μῦθοι (*Prog.* 73 Spengel).

13 For Greek "Syrians" = modern "Assyrians", see Haubold 2013, 122.

14 van Dijk 1997, 86, claims that, in some instances, μῦθος can also indicate the fabulistic genre as a whole. Cf. Strong 2021, 162 n. 99.

15 Cf. Falkowitz 1984; Holzberg 2002, 15–16. For scholarship on Mesopotamian literature picking up on these issues, see Alster 2005, 342–343.

16 The mention of Ninus and Belus sets the birth of fable in a mythological prehistory in the region of Mesopotamia. Belus here refers to the West Semitic god Baal, worshipped in Syria and the Levant, while Ninus refers to Baal's mythical son, the founder of the Assyrian city of Nineveh. For Ninus and Belus, see Hdt. 1.7; Ctes. *fr.* F1a Lenfant, Castor of Rhodes (*FGrH* 250 F 1–2).

17 On these poems, see Jiménez 2017 with further bibliography.

18 Disputation poems had been traditionally classified as a type of fable by e.g. Ebeling 1927; Williams 1956; Lambert 1960, 150. Other scholars of Near Eastern literature disagree, as these

tested on cuneiform tablets written in Sumerian and Akkadian languages in the 18th century BCE, they boast a long tradition.[19] These disputations are poetic, usually written in verse,[20] and have been received in the Greek literary tradition. For example, Callimachus' *Iambi* 4 revolves around the disputation of a bramble, a laurel and an olive tree. As has been noted, this poem has a Babylonian analogue in the disputation of *The Date Palm and the Tamarisk*.[21] Furthermore, it is worth considering the case of the *Etana*, a Babylonian mythological poem, into whose narrative a fable featuring a snake and an eagle is embedded. Even more interestingly, the *Etana* and its fable have been found to be a relevant precedent for Archilochus' fable of "The Fox and the Eagle".[22]

The idea that Babrius might be aware of a tradition of Babylonian fables in verse is corroborated by some further observations on a particular fable by Babrius. Babr. 84, a story of a gnat and bull, also survives in two other versions: one in the *Collectio Augustana* (Aesop. 137 P. [= 140 Hsr.; 190 Ch.]) and the other in the works of the Greek poet Mesomedes of Crete (11 Heitsch, *c.* 2nd century CE). However, all these fables have their main precedent in a Mesopotamian fable attested on a Babylonian tablet datable to 716 BCE:[23] the poem of "The Poor, Forlorn Wren".[24] This case of transmission between the Mesopotamian and the Greek

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poems contain almost no narration, only dialogue: see Bottéro 1991, 8; Vanstiphout 1997, 581 n. 2; Jiménez 2017, 11. However, narration is not essential in Greek fables (cf. e.g. Babr. 109). Moreover, there are disputation poems where narration is interwoven with the dialogue such as the *Bird and Fish* and the *Series of the Fox*. The taxonomy of disputation poems is a modern concern, which most likely did not prevent an ancient audience from noticing their similarities with fables. Furthermore, the reception of this material in the Greek sphere suggests that these texts were at least related to the type of texts which we now call fables.

19 Jiménez 2017, 3.

20 The distinction of prose versus verse is not always as straightforward in Akkadian as in Classical literature. Cf. Wasserman 2002, 158: "Akkadian literary texts were not normally constructed following a single obligatory metric or prosodic form." Rather, Akkadian verse "interweaves syntactic structure with basic semantic units, mostly within the boundaries of a single line or a couplet" (162). On features of Akkadian poetry, see also Jiménez 2017, 72–76 with further bibliography.

21 As Jiménez 2017, 132 observes, "both its topic and its structure [...] are strongly reminiscent of the Mesopotamian disputations". Interestingly, not only does Callimachus claim that his narrative is from the Lydians of old (οἱ πάλαι Λυδοί, Callim. *Ia.* 4.7), but he brands his iambic disputation poem as a fabulistic narrative by means of the noun αἶνος, one of the words used for fables in Greek (ἄκου‿ε‿δὴ τὸν αἶνον, "Indeed hear the fable", Callim. *Ia.* 4.6).

22 See Currie 2021.

23 For Haubold 2013, 27 this text and the Greek fables are plainly related.

24 See Jiménez 2017, 327–373 who refers to it as a poem (e.g. 330). The case of this story is tricky as there is hardly a complete surviving line, so we cannot properly check that it follows all the

fabulistic tradition has been thoroughly studied.[25] In particular, it was noticed that the Babrian fable closely corresponds to the Babylonian text, not just on thematic, but also on lexical-stylistic and formal-narrative levels.[26]

In my view, these parallels constitute a compelling case for Babrius' familiarity with Mesopotamian fable-like poetic literature. I recognize the risks of asserting a direct influence of Near Eastern literature on Babrius, as it inevitably raises the complex and possibly unanswerable question of the exact nature of their relationship.[27] Indeed, we cannot determine with certainty the language or the form — be it oral or written, poetry or prose — in which Babrius might have encountered these texts, if at all. Such inquiries, while intriguing, fall outside the purview of my current discussion. My objective here is merely to propose that the parallels I have laid out substantiate the possibility that Babrius was aware of fabulistic narratives within Mesopotamian contexts, and that his second prologue alludes to the *poetic* nature of these early fables with the word μῦθος. The question of whether Babrius actually read these texts remains an entirely separate scholarly problem.

3 Babrius' first prologue

If the second prologue takes a historical approach to the genre of the fable, discussing its origin, the first prologue traces a link between the fictional world of fables and a long-gone mythological past where animals could speak. Fables — also those by Aesop! — and the act of narration are referred to with the noun μῦθος (1 *prol.* 16) or its cognate (μυθέομεν, 1 *prol.* 7).[28] This apparent inconsistency, where Aesop's fables are labeled μῦθοι instead of λόγοι as in the second prologue, does not indicate a lack of distinction between these two generic terms on the part

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rules we know for Akkadian poetry. However, the surviving lines seem to follow a poetic structure and, most importantly, most of the lines seem to observe parallelism, an important Akkadian poetic feature. I thank Enrique Jiménez for pointing this out to me.

25 See e.g. West 2000, 95–96; Haubold 2013, 25–29.

26 See Currie 2021, 143–144, esp. n. 101.

27 Haubold 2013, 25–23 discusses the danger of a comparatist approach in the genre of fable. Cf. Spielhofer 2023, 112 n. 144. According to Holzberg 2019, 19 by mentioning the oriental fable, the author implies that he knew of such collections.

28 μυθέομεν in 1 *prol.* 7 could refer both to Babrius' individual act of narrating fables (and a conversation between Branchus and the I of the prologue) and to human fable-telling in general (including Babrius' fables).

of Babrius. On the contrary, I submit that Babrius employs the full potential of this generic terminology in two different contexts.

Let us take a closer look at the text of the first prologue where Babrius meaningfully opposes λόγοι and μῦθοι to highlight the fictional nature of his fables:

> Γενεὴ δικαίων ἦν τὸ πρῶτον ἀνθρώπων
> ὦ Βράγχε τέκνον, ἣν καλοῦσι χρυσείην,
> μεθ᾽ ἣν γενέσθαι φασὶν ἀργυρῆν ἄλλην·
> τρίτη δ᾽ ἀπ᾽ αὐτῶν ἐσμεν ἡ σιδηρείη.
> ἐπὶ τῆς δὲ χρυσῆς καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν ζῴων   5
> φωνὴν ἔναρθρον εἶχε καὶ λόγους ᾔδει
> οἵους περ ἡμεῖς μυθέομεν ἐς ἀλλήλους,
> ἀγοραὶ δὲ τούτων ἦσαν ἐν μέσαις ὕλαις.
> ἐλάλει δὲ πεύκη καὶ τὰ φύλλα τῆς δάφνης,
> καὶ πρῶτος ἰχθὺς συνελάλει φίλῳ ναύτῃ·   10
> στρουθοὶ δὲ συνετὰ πρὸς γεωργὸν ὡμίλουν·
> ἐφύετ᾽ ἐκ γῆς πάντα μηδὲν αἰτούσης,
> θνητῶν δ᾽ ὑπῆρχε καὶ θεῶν ἑταιρείη.
> μαθὼν δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ οὕτω ταῦτ᾽ ἔχοντα καὶ γνοίης
> ἐκ τοῦ σοφοῦ γέροντος ἧμιν Αἰσώπου   15
> μύθους φράσαντος τῆς ἐλευθέρης μούσης·
> ὧν νῦν ἕκαστον ἀνθίσας ἐμῇ μνήμῃ
> μελισταγές σοι †νοῦ τὸ† κηρίον θήσω,
> πικρῶν ἰάμβων σκληρὰ κῶλα θηλύνας.[29]
>
> (Babr. 1 *prol.*)

At first, there was a race of just men, Branchus my boy, which they call golden. After them, they say, came another generation, of silver; after these, we are the third generation, the one of iron. But in the golden age also all the other living creatures had articulated speech and knew such *logoi* as we ourselves now tell each other [in the form of μῦθοι]. Their assemblies were in the middle of the forests. Even the pine tree and the leaves of the laurel chatted. Also, at first, the fish chatted with the friendly sailor. The sparrows conversed in an intelligible way with the farmer. Everything grew from the earth, which was asking for nothing in return, and a companionship existed between gods and mortals. Having learnt that these things were so, may you also learn them from wise old Aesop, who told us fables (μῦθοι) with a free muse. Having adorned each one of these with flowers by means of my own memory, I shall set before you a honeycomb [...] dripping with sweetness, having softened the hard parts of the bitter *iamboi*.

(Transl. V.B.)

After a brief list of the different ages of man, the prologue launches into a description of the golden age. Within this description, lines 5–7 are worthy of closer analy-

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29 I follow Vaio's 2001 reconstruction of the text. Cf. Spielhofer 2023, 89–94.

sis because they will provide a springboard for a discussion of Babrius' μῦθοι on the basis of the opposition between μυθέομεν (7) and λόγους (6). *Prima facie*, Babrius here emphasizes that animals in this version of the golden age can speak with each other, just like we do.[30] Most scholars seem to render these lines in accordance with this understanding of the text. For example, Perry translates: "Now in the Golden age not only men but all the other living creatures had the power of speech and were familiar with such words as we ourselves now use in speaking to each other."[31] In my opinion, translations of this sort do not convey the importance of the two generic markers, λόγους and μυθέομεν,[32] and their fine semantic distinction.

To my knowledge, the only two scholars who have made an attempt at analysing these lines in depth are Williams and Vaio.[33] The only witness for line 7 of Babrius' first prologue is the fourth-century papyrus *Π₄* (P.Bouriant 1: οἵους περ ἡμεῖς μυθέομεν πρὸς ἀλλήλους) and some scholars have accordingly regarded it as spurious.[34] In order to defend the originality of line 7, Vaio observes that:

> Babrius distinguished between λόγοι ("words") at line 6 and μῦθοι ("fables") at line 16. (λόγους) μυθεῖν, used of actual human speech, becomes a play on words to make the following point: that animals of the Golden Age and in Aesop's fable (μῦθοι) knew such words (λόγοι) as we humans speak (μυθέομεν). The fabulous and the actual coincide in this matter of language.[35]

While spotting the juxtaposition of λόγους and μυθέομεν, Vaio does not uncover its full meaning.

Williams goes further in his interpretation, detecting in Babrius' prologue an allusion to Plato's *Politicus*.[36] In this dialogue, immediately after the Elean stranger finishes discussing the nature of the age of Cronus (268d7–272b3), he asks his interlocutor whether the age of Cronus or that of Zeus, during which they live, is

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30 For other discussions of speaking animals in Babrius, see Allgaier 2020; 2022; Pertsinidis 2020.

31 Perry 1965, 3. Similar translations are offered, e.g. by Hawkins 2015, 307; Mann 2018, 260–261; Spielhofer 2023, 88.

32 See n. 43 below.

33 Williams 1981; Vaio 2001. Cf. Althoff 2023, 353–354.

34 I believe line 7 to be original: cf. Vaio 1969; 2001, 5–7; Spielhofer 2023, 91–92; *contra* Luzzatto 1989, 271; Holzberg 2019, 201.

35 Vaio 2001, 7.

36 Dillon 1992, 35 n. 17, observes *en passant* that there might be some similarities between the age of Cronus in the *Politicus* and Babrius' text. Gera 2003, 18–32, even reads Babrius' golden age against the description of Cronus' reign in *Politicus*. However, they do not signal possible textual interactions.

more blessed (272b3–4). Since Young Socrates is unable to give an answer, the stranger suggests that there are two possible scenarios for what the inhabitants of the age of Cronus might have done when provided with the ability to converse with animals (272b8–d6). On the one hand,

> Εἰ μὲν τοίνυν οἱ τρόφιμοι τοῦ Κρόνου, παρούσης αὐτοῖς οὕτω πολλῆς σχολῆς καὶ δυνάμεως πρὸς τὸ μὴ μόνον ἀνθρώποις ἀλλὰ καὶ θηρίοις διὰ λόγων δύνασθαι συγγίγνεσθαι, κατε-χρῶντο τούτοις σύμπασιν ἐπὶ φιλοσοφίαν, μετά τε θηρίων καὶ μετ' ἀλλήλων ὁμιλοῦντες, καὶ πυνθανόμενοι παρὰ πάσης φύσεως εἴ τινά τις ἰδίαν δύναμιν ἔχουσα ᾔσθετό τι διάφορον τῶν ἄλλων εἰς συναγυρμὸν φρονήσεως, εὔκριτον ὅτι τῶν νῦν οἱ τότε μυρίῳ πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν διέφερον.
>
> (Pl. *Plt.* 272b8–c5)

> Well, then, if the foster children of Cronus, having all this leisure and the ability to converse not only with human beings but also with beasts, made full use of all these opportunities with a view to philosophy, talking with the animals and with one another and learning from every creature that, through possession of some peculiar power he may have had in any respect be-yond his fellows perceptions tending towards an increase of wisdom, it would be easy to decide that the people of those old times were immeasurably happier than those of our epoch.
>
> (Transl. Fowler/Lamb)

On the other hand,

> εἰ δ' ἐμπιμπλάμενοι σίτων ἄδην καὶ ποτῶν **διελέγοντο πρὸς ἀλλήλους καὶ τὰ θηρία μύθους οἷοι**[37] **δὴ καὶ τὰ νῦν περὶ αὐτῶν λέγονται**, καὶ τοῦτο, ὥς γε κατὰ τὴν ἐμὴν δόξαν ἀποφήνασθαι, καὶ μάλ' εὔκριτον. ὅμως δ' οὖν ταῦτα μὲν ἀφῶμεν, ἕως ἂν ἡμῖν μηνυτής τις ἱκανὸς φανῇ, ποτέρως οἱ τότε τὰς ἐπιθυμίας εἶχον περί τε ἐπιστημῶν καὶ τῆς τῶν λόγων χρείας.
>
> (Pl. *Plt.* 272c5–d4)

> Or if they merely ate and drank till they were full and gossiped with each other and the an-imals, telling such mythical stories as are even now told about them, in that case, too, it would, in my opinion, be very easy to reach a decision. However, let us pass those matters by, so long as there is no one capable of reporting whether the people in those days had de-sire for knowledge and the employment of speech.
>
> (Transl. Fowler/Lamb with alterations)

In the first scenario, the Elean concludes that the inhabitants of the age of Cronus would have been happier than those living in the current age of Zeus. In the sec-ond, he is a bit more cryptic, but one may safely assume that the lack of philoso-

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37 I here follow the most recent *OCT* edition by Duke *et al.* 1995 which prints μύθους οἷοι. See Robinson 1995, 39.

phizing would not provide optimal living conditions.[38] The thematic connection between these two passages and Babrius' prologue is at any rate striking, as both authors reflect on the role of language in the golden age. However, the connection is not only thematic. According to Williams, Babrius clearly alludes to the last cited passage:

> the unusual construction of the verb διαλέγεσθαι with the accusative is matched by the transitive μυθεῖσθαι, resulting in a particularly neat example of *imitatio cum variatione*: διελέγοντο μύθους in Plato gives rise to λόγους μυθέομαι in Babrius. [...] In both passages the point is the same, that in the remote past, as pictured in Aesopic fables, animals were able themselves to tell the same fables which we now tell about them to our fellow humans.[39]

Williams is undoubtedly on to something, but he does not unpack all the implications of the parallel between Plato's *Politicus* and Babrius' *Mythiambi*. In particular, he does not expand on the juxtaposition of λόγοι and μῦθοι and he does not comment on the transformation of λόγοι into μῦθοι, from noun to verb and vice versa (διελέγοντο μύθους ~ λόγους μυθέομεν).

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38 The meaning of the sentence "it would be very easy to reach a decision" is ambiguous, and the speaker could be taking for granted that even under these conditions the inhabitants of the age of Cronus would be happier. However, the use of εἰ μέν and εἰ δέ in these passages posits a clear opposition between the two scenarios. Other scholars have already observed how Plato here seems to acknowledge that the golden age is not necessarily better than our time given its lack of philosophy: see e.g. Nightingale 1996, 84; Giorgini 2005, 206 n. 110; El Murr 2010, 291–294.

39 Williams 1981, 209. Cf. Althoff 2023, 353 n. 21, who (rightly) believes that a reference to Plato's *Politicus* could also be possible from a thematic standpoint, even without the debated line 7 of Babrius' first prologue. Similarly to Babrius (1 *prol.* 12), Plato claims that during the golden age everything grew spontaneously (καρποὺς δὲ ἀφθόνους εἶχον ἀπό τε δένδρων καὶ πολλῆς ὕλης ἄλλης, οὐχ ὑπὸ γεωργίας φυομένους, ἀλλ᾽ αὐτομάτης ἀναδιδούσης τῆς γῆς, 272a2–5). However, this parallel alone does not prove a link between the two texts as this feature is also present in Hesiod's golden age (Hes. *Op.* 116–118) and others, cf. e.g. Hom. *Od.* 9.108–109 and Ov. *Met.* 1.101–102. Within their respective descriptions of the golden age, the verb ὁμιλέω occurs in both Babrius (ὡμίλουν, 1 *prol.* 11) and Plato (ὁμιλοῦντες, *Plt.* 272c2). Another point of contact between the two texts might be found in the phrase πρὸς ἀλλήλους, if we accept this reading for line 7 of Babrius' first prologue. Vaio 2001, 6, suggests replacing πρός with ἐς so as to avoid the resolution of the seventh element which would create an anapaest, unique in this position. Nevertheless, as Luzzatto/La Penna 1986, ciii point out, no metrical rule exists without exception, and we do not possess the whole of Babrius. Although it is possible that line 7 as transmitted in Π_4 is a gloss of an interpolator borrowing the formulation from Plato (cf. Spielhofer 2023, 92 n. 28), the importance of Plato to the prologue of the *Mythiambi* increases the likelihood that our fabulist slightly forced the metre of his choliamb with the expression πρὸς ἀλλήλους to make the textual connection with the *Politicus* even stronger.

I argue that by recalling this passage, Babrius is bringing attention to the opposition between λόγους in line 6 and μυθέομεν in line 7. In Plato's *Politicus*, men and animals are said to be telling each other μῦθοι (**διελέγοντο** πρὸς ἀλλήλους καὶ τὰ θηρία **μύθους**)[40] such as the ones that we now tell about them (**οἷοι** δὴ καὶ τὰ νῦν περὶ αὐτῶν **λέγονται**). In Babrius' prologue, however, the λόγοι that animals knew in the golden age (**λόγους** ᾔδει) are told about them by men of the present (**οἵους** περ ἡμεῖς **μυθέομεν** ἐς ἀλλήλους). Moreover, whereas in the *Politicus*, the speaker uses two verbs in the third person plural (διελέγοντο; λέγονται), thus distancing himself from the narrative act, Babrius chooses a first-person plural (μυθέομεν) when referring to the narration of fables in the present (1 *prol.* 7), thus showing his audience that he is one of those who narrate μῦθοι.[41] Furthermore, the change from διελέγοντο to μυθέομεν might signal a generic shift if we realize that Babrius, an author of fables, is drawing from a philosophical text; in fact, while the former verb was commonly used for philosophical, dialectical conversations,[42] the latter form is strongly linked with μῦθος,[43] the generic term for fable.[44]

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40 Rowe 1995, 194, argues that "it is hard to see precisely which current stories (μῦθοι) ES is referring to; Aesop's fables [...], which might look the obvious choice, typically involve talking animals, but not people." It is not true, however, that there are no Aesopic fables featuring humans. This mistaken conception is rooted in a late development of the genre (see Holzberg 2005, 248).

41 One may also observe that in the *Politicus* the inhabitants of the golden age are said to talk to each other and to the animals (πρὸς ἀλλήλους καὶ τὰ θηρία). In Babrius' time, men only talk to one another (ἐς ἀλλήλους).

42 See Rowe 1995, 194. Nevertheless, one should note that διελέγοντο in the quoted passage might signify a distinctly *unphilosophical* conversation!

43 Theon derives μῦθος from μυθέομαι (*Prog.* 73 Spengel). In the second prologue as well, Babrius describes his activity of narrating fables with a verb etymologically linked to the noun μῦθος: μυθιάζομαι (2 *prol.* 13).

44 The generic difference between fabulistic and philosophical conceptualizations of animals can be substantiated further if we detect in lines 5–6 of Babrius' prologue a playful allusion to the famous passage of Aristotle's *Politics*, where both men and animals are said to possess φωνή, but only the former have λόγος (1253a9–19). One might also compare a passage from Xenophon's *Memorabilia* where Socrates denies that animals have the ability of articulated speech (ἀρθροῦν [...] τὴν φωνήν, 1.4.12). The animals of Babrius' golden age and fables are characters of a fabulous world, not the object of philosophical study or natural science. Cf. Hawkins 2017. Interestingly, φωνή and λόγος are the gifts that Aesop receives from the Muses in the *Life of Aesop* (7.1–17 G, Ferrari 1997). Furthermore, the claim that animals have λόγος might hint at the way in which animals are sometimes referred to as τὰ ἄλογα (cf. e.g. Pl. *Prt.* 321c; Xen. *Hier.* 7.3; Epict. 1.6.12). See Heath 2005, 10: "The *logos* denied in [the] adjective *aloga* was originally speech, and only later spread its semantic wings to encompass 'irrationality'." Cf. Acosta-Hughes 2002, 176, on Callimachus' appropriation of the language of the zoological writers in the opening lines of *Iambi* 2. For a

There is another parallel between Babrius' *Mythiambi* and a text by Plato — his *Phaedo*, which, together with Babrius' reference to the *Politicus*, serves to focalize the opposition between λόγοι and μῦθοι in the three lines that open the description of the golden age. *Phaedo* 60b–d is part of Plato's narration of the last moments of Socrates' life. Cebes asks Socrates why he has dedicated himself to poetry while in prison (60d). Socrates explains that a dream urged him to (60e).[45] At first, he composed a hymn to Apollo, but then he decided to start putting Aesopic fables into verse:[46]

> ἐννοήσας ὅτι τὸν ποιητὴν δέοι, εἴπερ μέλλοι ποιητὴς εἶναι, ποιεῖν μύθους ἀλλ᾽ οὐ λόγους, καὶ αὐτὸς οὐκ ἦ μυθολογικός, διὰ ταῦτα δὴ **οὓς προχείρους εἶχον μύθους καὶ ἠπιστάμην**, τοὺς Αἰσώπου, τούτων ἐποίησα οἷς πρώτοις ἐνέτυχον.
>
> (Pl. *Phd.* 61b3–7)

> Thinking that if one were to be a poet one should compose stories, not factual accounts, and I myself was not a creator of stories, then for this reason I worked up the first fables of Aesop I came across that I had available and that I knew.
>
> (Transl. Emlyn-Jones/Preddy with alterations).

This passage from Plato constitutes a kind of foundation myth for the transposition of Aesop's fables into poetry/song. Though others, like Hesiod, had included fables in their poems, it is the innovative Socrates who first attempts to put the Aesopic prose fables that he had at hand into verse (thus anticipating Alexandrian verse-adaptations of prose works, such as Aratus' *Phaenomena*, which is based on Eudoxius' astronomical work).[47] It would not be surprising, therefore, if Babrius

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review of ancient philosophical positions on whether animals have speech and reason or not, see Sorabji 1993, 80–86.

45 See also Luchetti's chapter in this volume on this passage in the *Phaedo*.

46 On why the soon-to-die Socrates evokes Aesop (likewise condemned to death), see Kurke 2006, 13–19, 35–38; 2011, 251–264; Zafiropoulos 2011. Scholars have observed many similarities between these two characters — see Jedrkiewicz 1989, 111–127, 368–373; Schauer/Merkle 1992; Compton 2006, 154–165; Zafiropoulos, 2015. Not only is Aesop important for Plato as an author (cf. esp. Kurke 2011, 253; Capra 2019), but both Plato and his Socrates play a significant role in the history of fable: cf. Jedrkiewicz 1989, 368 n. 68.

47 Scholars have entertained the possibility that a prose book containing the *Life of Aesop* and some fables was already circulating in the 6th or 5th century BCE and that this book would have provided Demetrius of Phalerum with a model for creating a collection of Aesopic texts in the 4th century. Cf. Hausrath 1909, coll. 1711–1714; Crusius 1920, xvi–xviii; Zeitz 1936, 242–245. According to this hypothesis, Socrates might point to the book's existence with the phrase προχείρους εἶχον μύθους. Although recent scholarship seems to have rejected this *Volksbuch* model, some scholars still argue for an early textual fixation of the Aesopic material: see e.g. West 1984.

were here connecting his text with Socrates' words in a rather Alexandrian, witty and playful manner:[48]

> ἐπὶ τῆς δὲ χρυσῆς καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν ζῴων
> φωνὴν ἔναρθρον **εἶχε καὶ λόγους ᾔδει**
> **οἵους** περ ἡμεῖς μυθέομεν ἐς ἀλλήλους
> (Babr. 1 *prol.* 5–7)

In both, we find a phrase (see text in bold) which is opened by a form of the verb ἔχω (εἶχον, εἶχε) and closed by a verb of knowledge (ἠπιστάμην, ᾔδει). Between these two verbs, both in Plato and in Babrius, we find the conjunction καί.[49] In Babrius we find λόγους, where Plato has μῦθους: two terms used to indicate fables.

Socrates' formal transformation of prose fables into poetry (maybe in iambic verse?)[50] is crucial for Babrius, insofar as the process of taking Aesopic material and versifying it characterizes his poetic activity in the *Mythiambi*. But it implicates another of Babrius' models as well, namely Callimachus. For the textual link between Babrius' first prologue and Plato's *Phaedo* is also important in considering the relationship between the *Mythiambi* and Callimachus' *Iambi* 2. Hawkins and Spielhofer already noticed that Babrius' first prologue is dominated by references to Callimachus.[51] For example, the name of Babrius' addressee Branchus recalls the title-character from Callimachus' *Branchus* (*fr.* 229 Pf.), who appears also in *Iambi* 4 — "a Callimachean calling card", as Hawkins calls it.[52] The latter poem, featuring a quarrel between the laurel and the olive tree, is also brought to mind by Babrius' mention of the chatty laurel in line 9. Let us now see why *Iambi 2* is particularly relevant to our present discussion:

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48 It only makes sense for Babrius to start his prologue by alluding to Hesiod, often regarded in antiquity as the first fabulist (cf. e.g. Quint. *Inst*. 5.11.19; Plut. *Conv. sept. sap*. 158b), through his evocation of the ages of men, and then to connect his work to Socrates, the first to have put Aesopic fables into poetry.

49 There might also be a connection between προχείρους and ἔναρθρον, insofar as both terms consist of a preposition working as a prefix (προ-, ἔν-) and a noun belonging to the semantic field of the body (-αρθρον, -χείρους). Plato's relative pronoun οὕς could, moreover, find its parallel in Babrius' οἵους.

50 Adrados 1999, 244, believes that Socrates set these fables to an iambic metre.

51 Hawkins 2014; 2015; Spielhofer 2023, 94–109.

52 Hawkins 2014, 101. The Callimachean Branchus was a mythical shepherd who founded the shrine of Apollo at Didyma. Supposedly, the *Branchus* was an occasional poem meant to memorialize the Ptolemaic refoundation of this shrine. In *Iambi* 4 (28–31), Branchus is depicted as a favorite of Apollo. See Acosta-Hughes 2003.

Ἦν κεῖνος οὑνιαυτός, ᾧ τό τε πτηνόν
καὶ τοὐν θαλάσσῃ καὶ τὸ τετράπουν αὕτως
ἐφθέγγεθ᾽ ὡς ὁ πηλὸς ὁ Προμήθειος
. . . .
τἀπὶ Κρόνου τε καὶ ἔτι τὰ πρὸ τη[
λ..ουσα και κως [.]υ σ[.]νημεναις.[5
δίκαιος ὁ [Ζε]ύς, οὐ δίκαι[α] δ᾽ αἰσυμνέων
τῶν ἑρπετῶν [μ]ὲν ἐξέκοψε τὸ φθέ[γμα,
γένος δὲ τ.υτ.[.].ρον — ὥσπερ οὐ κάρτ[ος
ἡμέων ἐχόντων χἠτέροις ἀπάρξασθαι –
...]ψ ἐς ἀνδρῶν· καὶ κᵢυᵢνὸς [μ]ὲ[ν] ᵢΕὔᵢδημος,   10
ὄᵢνοᵢυ δὲ Φίλτων, ψιττακοῦ δε[
οἱ δὲ τραγῳδοὶ τῶν θάλασσαν οᵢ[κεύντων
ἔχο[υ]σι φωνήν· οἱ δὲ πάντες [ἄνθρωποι
καὶ πουλύμυθοι καὶ λάλοι πεφ[ύκασιν
ἐκεῖθεν, ὠνδρόνικε· ταῦτα δ᾽ Αᵢἴσωᵢπος   15
ὁ Σαρδιηνὸς εἶπεν, ὅντιν᾽ οἱ Δελφοί
ᾄδοντα μῦθον οὐ καλῶς ἐδέξαντο.
                                    (Callim. *Ia.* 2)

It was in that time, when the winged | and that which dwells in the sea, and likewise the four-footed | used to give utterance as does the Promethean clay | ... | in the time of Cronus' rule, and still before [| and [saying] how [.]υ σ[.]νημεναις.[| just is Zeus, but not justly ruling, | he cut off the voice of those which crawl, | yet the race τ.υτ.[.].ρον — as though we had | not enough power to give the first fruits even to others — | ...]ψ [he turned] to [the race] of men. And Eudemus has | the voice of a dog, and Philton that of an ass, and of the parrot [| and the tragedians have that of those | who dwell in the sea. And all men | are both wordy and babbling | from that time, Andronicus. These things Aesop | from Sardis said, whom the Delphians | did not receive well as he sang his tale.

                                    (Transl. Acosta-Hughes)

Although not much is left from this Callimachean poem, the Diegesis to *Iambi* 2 allows us to make better sense of these fragmentary lines: during a time when men and animals shared the ability to talk, the animals complained about the way in which Zeus ruled and the father of the gods, as punishment, took the ability to speak away from them. Consequently, the race of men became even more "wordy" and "babbling".[53]

Both Babrius' first prologue and Callimachus' *Iambi 2* discuss a period of time when animals and man could speak, and both indicate Aesop as a source of fa-

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53 Convinced that Babrius reworked the Callimachean text, Hausrath 1949 used his prologue to reconstruct what is missing from *Iambi* 2. Cf. Corbato 1979 and Acosta-Hughes 2002, 176 n. 18.

bles.[54] Furthermore, there are also textual parallels between these two poems that are worth considering: for example, the adjective δίκαιος from *Iambi* 2.6 is picked up in 1 *prol.* 1, while the adjective λάλος (*Ia.* 2.14) is echoed in the verb λαλέω (1 *prol.* 9). Moreover, the use of ταῦτα in both poems (1 *prol.* 14; *Ia.* 2.15), with reference to the things that the addressee can learn from Aesop, and the two nouns Αἰσώπου (1 *prol.* 15) and Αἴσωπος (*Ia.* 2.15) suggest a further connection between the two passages.

According to Hawkins, when Babrius decides to versify Aesopic fables,

> it could be imagined that Babrius was looking more to Callimachus than the Platonic Socrates [...]. But although Callimachus may well have taken a cue from Plato, he does not bray about his creativity on this point as openly as do Babrius and the Platonic Socrates. So even though no signs of a specific verbal allusion to Plato exist here, an important connection emerges between what Socrates did in the *Phaedo* and what Babrius claims for his own poetry in both of his prologues.[55]

Considering the link between Babrius' poetic programme and both Callimachus and Plato, it should (*pace* Hawkins) not come as a surprise to also find a textual connection with Plato's *Phaedo* in Babrius' prologue. This possibility gains even more traction if one considers that the Platonic passage in question was also relevant for Callimachus' *Iambi*, an important model for our fabulist. As Scodel and Acosta-Hughes argue, in Callimachus' *Iambi* 2.17 (ᾄδοντα μῦθον),[56] "in his act of 'singing *mythos*', i.e. rendering *mythos* as μουσική, Aesop reflects Socrates' music-making in the *Phaedo*."[57] Babrius thus presents himself as the heir of a tradition of versifying fables that counts among its ranks one of the most famous philosophers of Classical Greece and one of the major representatives of Hellenistic poetry.

The connection with the *Phaedo* alerts the reader once more to the programmatic juxtaposition of μῦθοι and λόγοι in Babrius' first prologue. In fact, Socrates claims in the *Phaedo* that the poet should deal with μῦθοι, "fictional narratives", rather than with λόγοι, "factual accounts" (61b).[58] Significantly, both of these

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54 Cf. Hawkins 2015, 312. In Babrius, however, Aesop appears as a source of fables in general, whereas in Callimachus he is the source of a particular story.

55 Hawkins 2014, 110; 2015, 315.

56 For Hawkins 2015, 312, the Callimachean image of Aesop singing fables is used by Babrius to bookend the second prologue: μῦθος (2 *prol.* 1) [...] ἀείδω (2 *prol.* 16).

57 Acosta-Hughes/Scodel 2004, 10.

58 The use of λόγοι and μῦθοι in this passage has been the subject of prolific discussion. Cf. e.g. Rowe 1993, 120–122; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 368–373; Morgan 2000, 192–197; Giuliano 2005, 221–223. The difference between λόγοι and μῦθοι appears also elsewhere in Plato, cf. e.g. *Grg.* 523a. Like Babrius, Plato uses both λόγος and μῦθος to describe Aesop's fables in the *Phaedo*: Cebes uses the term

words can also indicate "fables"; however, when they are juxtaposed, μῦθος has a connotation of fictitiousness.[59] In the context of Babrius' first prologue, this opposition drives a meaningful wedge between Babrius' fables, which in the first prologue are conceived as μῦθοι through the verb μυθέομεν, and the animals' λόγοι in the golden age.[60] Within the setting of the golden age, all animals are described as knowing λόγοι (λόγους ἤδει, 1 *prol.* 6), which could have a wide range of meanings, from "words" or "speeches" to "narratives" (even "fables"!),[61] or, in a philosophical vein, "reasons", "philosophical discourses", or "factual accounts".[62] However, once these λόγοι, whether they are words, accounts or narratives, are taken out of their original setting and placed within Babrius' poetic discourse, they are transformed into μῦθοι or told in the form of μῦθοι (μυθέομεν, 1 *prol.* 7). In my view, given the different meanings of λόγοι and μῦθοι, this juxtaposition highlights the exact opposite of what Vaio argues: here, the fabulous and the actual do *not* coincide. When the λόγοι, the conversations which the inhabitants of the golden age share with each other, are extracted from their original setting, they are told in the form of μῦθοι, i.e. "fictional narratives", where animals can still speak and interact with men and gods even if the golden age is at that stage long

λόγος (60d1) and Socrates μῦθος (61b6). However, this does not reflect a lack of differentiation (see Dorter 1982, 6–7; Rowe 1993, 122). Plato seems to acknowledge a difference, at least a formal one if not also in content, between these two terms and their relationship with truth. For a different reading of the passage, see Zafiropoulos 2015, 106–107.

59 See van Dijk 1997, 85 (with further references), who observes that "in principle, μῦθος 'story', like the post-epic λόγος, is neutral as to the fictitiousness or veracity of the story which it designates. Later, when λόγος eclipses μῦθος, a differentiating tendency can be observed, in that μῦθος is reserved for 'fiction', λόγος 'truth'. When fables are termed both μῦθος and λόγος, μῦθος often has an obvious connotation of fictitiousness." He also points to Pl. *Phd.* 60c–61b to back up these observations. Cf. Zafiropoulos 2001, 2–3. For other instances of the distinction between μῦθος and λόγος in Greek imperial literature (esp. ancient novels), see Hunter 1983, 47–48, 114 n. 99. Cf. Vernant 1980, 186–207; Buxton 1999; Wians 2009; 2019.

60 Aesop's fables are referred to as μύθους at 1 *prol.* 16, and, consequently, so are those by Babrius because he claims to be using Aesopic material at 1 *prol.* 17. Also, Babrius is part of the first person plural ἡμεῖς which is the subject of μυθέομεν at 1 *prol.* 7.

61 One may even argue that Babrius is here proposing that in the golden age animals were telling each other stories which resemble the fables Babrius and Aesop offer to their public!

62 The fact that Babrius already uses the *terminus technicus* of rhetoric φωνὴν ἔναρθρον to describe animals' speech (cf. Spielhofer 2023, 96) would make it less of a surprise to read λόγος as another *terminus technicus* for philosophical discourse. Furthermore, in the *Politicus* λόγος is also used to indicate a philosophical conversation (*Plt.* 268d–e). It might even be possible to envision the inhabitants of Babrius' golden age conducting philosophical discussions.

gone.[63] In my view, Babrius, subject of the verb μυθέομεν,[64] and Aesop, whose μῦθοι are the source of inspiration for Babrius' poetic output, can only recreate these vocal interactions between animals by turning λόγοι into μῦθοι, fictionalizing the very ability of animals to talk which once was a reality. In this way, if Plato's Socrates highlights the difference between λόγοι and μῦθοι and describes his process of turning Aesopic prose fables into verse, the first prologue to the *Mythiambi* shows that, firstly, Babrius is aligning his literary goal with Socrates' attempt at versifying Aesopic fables,[65] and, secondly, that he is reflecting on what it means to turn λόγοι, "factual accounts" or "speeches" of the inhabitants of the golden age, into μῦθοι, "fictional narratives" in verse.

Furthermore, Babrius' allusion to Plato allows him to grant his fables a certain degree of seriousness and meaningfulness. Although Plato denounces μῦθοι which are plainly false without any ethical or philosophical relevance,[66] he is not opposed to all μῦθοι:[67] "both forms of discourse [λόγοι and μῦθοι] are necessary because, although each one is unmistakably different from the other, nonetheless each one offers a complementary access to truth."[68] It is within this framework that Babrius seems to have carefully chosen his allusions to the Platonic corpus by

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63 The separation is emphasized by the juxtaposition of two verbs, εἶχε and ᾔδει, in the past tense in line 6 and the verb μυθέομεν in the present tense in line 7.

64 See n. 28 above.

65 Nothing survives of these verses, if they ever existed in the first place, which is impossible to determine. For acceptance of Socrates' having composed a hymn to Apollo and versified the fables of Aesop, see Guthrie 1969, 326 n. 1; West 1984, 109; Vander Waerdt 1994, 4–5. For a speculative attempt at identifying what fables Socrates versified, see McPherran 2012.

66 For a philosophical discussion of the importance of μῦθος and its meaning in Plato, see Brisson 1994; Murray 1999; Halliwell 2000; Morgan 2000, 132–184; Partenie 2009; Collobert *et al.* 2012.

67 μῦθος for Plato is a term that encompasses various types of narratives, including Aesopic fables. In fact, also in the *Politicus*, Plato might refer to μῦθος in a way that is far broader than just Aesopic fables. It is not always easy to distinguish in Greek if μῦθος should be understood as myth or as fable. Nevertheless, as Kurke 2011, 254, observed, Socrates' strict preference for referring to Aesopic tales as μῦθοι in the *Phaedo* is "suggestive, since it raises the possibility that platonic μῦθος, universally and unproblematically understood as 'myth' in the reading of Plato's dialogues may — at least on some occasion — denote Aesopic fables." Babrius himself does not seem to mark the genre of the fable in stark contrast with myth. This is clear in his choice to open his book of fables with a version of the Hesiodic myth (cf. Kurke 2011, 287 n. 68, who categorizes the Hesiodic myth of races as a fable), which leads Nøjgaard 1967, 192 to argue that Babrius invites us to look at his fable as a kind of myth, a fantastic tale. The idea that Babrius is intentionally thinning the generic boundaries between myth and fable, as they are both μῦθοι, is further supported by the presence of mythological characters in his fables, such as Herakles (Babr. 15; 20), Theseus (Babr. 15), Prokne and Philomela (Babr. 12), and Prometheus (Babr. 66).

68 Most 2012, 23.

selecting two dialogues where μῦθοι are considered an inextricable part of the Platonic philosophical dialectic. In this way, Babrius stresses that his μῦθοι are not mere trivial "fictional tales".

If we now take into consideration the context of the lines of the *Politicus* and the *Phaedo*, to which Babrius alludes in lines 6 and 7 of his first prologue, it will become clear that the content of his fables is meant to be serious, useful and with some philosophical relevance. In the *Phaedo*, when Socrates philosophizes about the concepts of pleasure and pain (60b–c), he claims that, "if Aesop had thought of it, he would have written a fable (μῦθον)" (εἰ ἐνενόησεν αὐτὰ Αἴσωπος, μῦθον ἂν συνθεῖναι, Pl. *Phd.* 60c1–2). As Jedrkiewicz observes, we can see in this extract how for Plato Aesopic fable-telling can thus be an alternative form of philosophizing, of aiming at the truth.[69] The importance of μῦθος is also stressed in the other Socratic passages recalled in Babrius' first prologue. Technically speaking, Plato's description of the golden age in the *Politicus* is not targeting μῦθοι as useless per se, but the use of μῦθοι for trivial purposes in the context of eating and drinking.[70] In fact, in the *Politicus* the value of μῦθος as a philosophical tool is undeniable. In order to prevent their philosophical argument (λόγος) from hitting a roadblock, the young Socrates and the Elean decide to make use of μῦθος, the narration of the golden age, as a viable alternative for conducting their philosophical discussion (268d). Thus, by tying his work to Plato's *Phaedo* and *Politicus* and by juxtaposing λόγος and μῦθος in lines 6–7, Babrius also emphasizes the potential of fables to convey a valuable message to his audience,[71] through a process of fictionalization which requires a transformation of λόγος, "argument", into μῦθος, "fiction".[72]

My contention that Babrius' juxtaposition of λόγος and μῦθος in the first prologue underscores the ability of his fables to carry a serious meaning is strength-

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69 Jedrkiewicz 1989, 369. Cf. also Giuliano 2005, 222, 295, and Morgan 2000, 193.

70 What should we make of the fact that the passage from Plato's *Politicus* to which Babrius alludes envisions frivolous, trivial, and seemingly non-philosophical conversations? In my view, Babrius subtly challenges the Elean Stranger's assumption that the golden age would be no happier than present times if men "gossiped with each other and the animals, telling such mythical stories as are even now told about them." In fact, Babrius underscores that animals possess λόγος, making them ideal partners for meaningful dialogue. Additionally, Babrius could aim to demonstrate that even those stories which the Elean Stranger implicitly disparages as trivial might actually hold philosophical significance.

71 Babrius is not the first to observe the philosophical importance of fabulistic narratives, whose pedagogical and ethical relevance was well known by the Imperial era. On the ethics of Greek fable, see Zafiropolous 2001.

72 One could even push this interpretation further and argue that it is part of the genius of fable to see the rationality (λόγος) in animal speech and to convey that rationality in its μῦθοι.

ened by the denotations that these terms had acquired by the Imperial age. Theon defines the genre of fable as follows:

> Μῦθός ἐστι λόγος ψευδὴς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν. Εἰδέναι δὲ χρή, ὅτι μὴ περὶ παντὸς μύθου τὰ νῦν ἡ σκέψις ἐστίν, ἀλλ᾽ οἷς μετὰ τὴν ἔκθεσιν ἐπιλέγομεν τὸν λόγον, ὅτου εἰκών ἐστιν· ἔσθ᾽ ὅτε μέντοι τὸν λόγον εἰπόντες ἐπεισφέρομεν τοὺς μύθους.
>
> (Theon *Prog.* 72–73 Spengel)

> A fable is a fictitious story giving an image of truth,[73] but one should know that the present consideration is not about all fables but about those in which, after stating the fable, we add the meaning of which it is an image; sometimes, of course, we bring in the fables after having stated the meaning.
>
> (Transl. Kennedy)[74]

Here, λόγος is intimately connected with truth, whereas μῦθος is false in nature but resembling the truth. Moreover, this passage suggests that λόγος can also indicate "pro- or epimythium".[75] This is not surprising as the *fabula docet* is essentially the explanation of the meaning (λόγος) that the fable is trying to convey with its fictitious narrative (μῦθος). Accordingly, even though μῦθος, contrary to λόγος, is one step removed from ἀλήθεια, as it only resembles it, it can still partake of the λόγος. Such remarks might acquire further relevance in an author such as Babrius who does not always (if at all) attach a pro- or epimythium (λόγος) to his compositions.[76] Thus, by stressing that his μῦθοι are built on the basis of λόγοι, Babrius could also point out that his fables, μῦθοι, have meaning, λόγος, even in those cases when the *fabula docet* (λόγος) is apparently missing.

According to Hunter, Theon's definition of μῦθος is "one of the many ways in which traditions of education and criticism came to terms with the Platonic critique."[77] I believe that the Platonic references in Babrius and the juxtaposition of λόγος and μῦθος in lines 6 and 7 of his first prologue are to be read in similar

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73 Here, ἀλήθειαν could be translated both as "truth" or "reality".

74 For more on this passage, see Patillon/Bolognesi 1997, xlix–lv; Morgan 1998, 221–223; Gangloff 2002, 26–32. Cf. also Plut. *Mor.* 348a: ὁ δὲ μῦθος εἶναι βούλεται λόγος ψευδὴς ἐοικὼς ἀληθινῷ ("a fable aims to be a false story resembling a true one").

75 The Greek text simply states "we add meaning" (ἐπιλέγομεν τὸν λόγον). According to Patillon/ Bolognesi 1997, 31 n. 168, the use of ἐπιλέγειν indicates that this refers to what Theon subsequently terms ἐπίλογος (*Prog.* 75.2 Spengel), i.e. "the moral". Cf. van Dijk 1997, 85; Hunter 2014, 238; Strong 2021, 163.

76 See Becker 2006; Spielhofer 2023, 21–22.

77 Hunter 2014, 237. This is not an unprecedented preoccupation in Greek Imperial literature: see e.g. Philostr. *V A* 5.14.2–3; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 1.49.

terms.[78] Plato radicalized the difference between μῦθος and λόγος, which was characteristic of early Greek philosophy, by reappropriating myth from the poetic realm and being the first to introduce a negative connotation for some μῦθοι.[79] By putting his work in relation to, and perhaps even competition with, two Platonic passages that acknowledge the pedagogical importance and philosophical value of μῦθος,[80] Babrius justifies the use of μῦθοι and appropriates them for his literary and pedagogical endeavour. Aesopic fables, in fact, had a crucial role in the ancient education system, especially in the curriculum of rhetorical exercises during the Imperial period.[81] In line with the intrinsically pedagogical nature of Aesop's fables, Babrius seems to envision an educational value also for his own fables, as he emphasizes the process of learning, which should result from Aesopic fables, and acquiring knowledge with the verbs μαθών and γνοίης (1 *prol*. 14) in the first prologue. In this way, Babrius presents himself as the educator of Branchus, who is the son of a king (ὦ παῖ βασιλέως Ἀλεξάνδρου, 2 *prol*. 1) and consequently, a future king.[82] While we know that poets like Callimachus or Theocritus had concrete ties to the Ptolemies, we know nothing at all about Babrius' links to any real king or prince. Nevertheless, regardless of whether Babrius was a real court poet or just pretending to be one, his self-presentation as such would not be unfitting in the context of fables. Indeed, he could be playing with the traditional image of Aesop as an adviser of kings.[83]

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78 For the popularity of Plato during the Imperial era, see e.g. De Lacy 1974; Trapp 1990; Fowler 2018.

79 See e.g. Morgan 2000, 14–17, with further bibliography.

80 Betegh 2021, 78 argues that the way in which the Elean stranger introduces his myth (*Plt*. 268d–e) shows that he agrees with Plato's ideas in the *Laws*, where, through the character of the Athenian, he explains at great length that mythical narratives, even if technically lies, are essential in instilling the correct system of values and a shared *Weltanschauung* in young members of the community (*Leg*. 664a).

81 Cf. e.g. Becker 2006, esp. 169–171; Strong 2021, 131–172. The *tabulae ceratae Assendelftianae* place the work of Babrius in a pedagogical context. On these, see Hesseling 1892/1893.

82 Like Fusci 1901, 34 n. 2, I believe the son of King Alexander and Branchus to be the same person. The best approach to the problems surrounding the identity of the addressee in the prologues is to follow Hawkins 2014, 88 n. 3, who suggests that King Alexander and Branchus could be two fictional characters. Cf. Spielhofer 2021. For a different view, see Perry 1965, lvi–lvii. For a recent attempt at reconstructing the identity of the addressee, see Morgan 2007, 326–330.

83 See Adrados 1999, 652–654. In light of these considerations, it is even more striking that Babrius, a royal tutor, alludes to the *Politicus*, a dialogue which praises monarchy as a form of government, aims to discuss the qualities and nature of a good statesman, and also reflects on the nature of pedagogy.

4 Conclusion

As I have shown, the investigation of Babrius' narrative of the golden age where animals, gods and men could talk to each other plays a pivotal role in uncovering Babrius' conceptualization of the genre of the fable as μῦθος. Babrius' decision to conceive his own fables as μῦθος, as reflected in μυθίαμβος (2 *prol.* 9), carries with it a precise message: even as his fables are fictional and in verse, they retain their ability to convey a useful meaning (λόγος), maybe even a philosophically relevant one.[84] He casts λόγος into a mythical past and presents μῦθοι as a prerogative of the present. Throughout this discussion, it should have become clear that Babrius is not a simple writer of fables, but a skillful poet who interacts meaningfully and wittily with foundational ancient Greek authors such as Callimachus and Plato. If Plato reclaimed the use of myth from Greek literature for his philosophical purposes,[85] Babrius stages a process of reappropriating μῦθοι in the form of a "mythification of the *Logos*". This expression is borrowed from Most's article *From λόγος to μῦθος*.[86] Interestingly, Most highlights that, with some exceptions, the European philosophers following the Enlightenment had a new appreciation for the concept of myth (μῦθος) and its relations to reason (λόγος), in contrast to their predecessors. Although I do not want to evaluate Babrius' poetic programme by anachronistic standards, we may conclude that he too develops "a concept of *Mythos* which is full of the elements and claims of *Logos* and has the dignity of a Quasi-*Logos*."[87]

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84 *Contra* Nøjgaard 1967, 192. He argues that Babrian fables are not allegorical and no longer "moral" in the sense of didactic.

85 For an example, see e.g. Männlein-Robert 2014.

86 Most 1999, 42. *Contra* Nestle 1940.

87 Most 1999, 42.

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